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«PERHAPS WE WILL ABANDON THE IRANIANS FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CHINESE» (C)

A CASE STUDY ON THE BELARUS-IRAN RELATIONS IN 1993-2012

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Summary

Relations with Iran are treated by the Belarusian leadership as an important element of the country's international relations. However, the loud rhetoric of the Belarusian government has little to do with concrete results of this cooperation, just as little as the attempts by certain political circles in Belarus to present bilateral relations with Iran as a dangerous step in international politics. Belarus would undoubtedly receive large benefits from cooperation with Iran, but first it has to create relevant infrastructure and legal framework for projects implementation. So far, it occasionally becomes a media victim of international tensions over Iran, despite having no connection to them. In fact, relations with Iran are an example of a circumspect opportunism of the Belarusian regime.

1. Introduction.

1.1. General characteristics and periodization.

Relations with Iran are a perfect illustration of the paradoxical prudence of the Belarusian leadership in foreign policy. Such relations, as well as relations with some other countries of the world, give food for positive and negative myths articulated, respectively, by the Belarusian authorities and the opposition. Such relations really draw Belarus into international conflicts of interest, vital to the Western world.

In the Belarus-Iran relations the Belarusian side has usually formulated the initiative. Iran was rather sceptical of Belarus in the 1990s and in the first half of the 2000s, more focusing on cooperation with Russia and even Ukraine among former Soviet Union countries. It was Belarus that started the process of establishing inter-state relations; it was the Belarusian president who visited Tehran first. The return visit of the Iranian president was repeatedly postponed and took place more than six years after.

Only when the international situation became more difficult for Iran, (European countries joined sanctions and other restrictive measures earlier introduced by the U.S. and Russia significantly reduced its cooperation with Tehran), the Iranian government started treating the relations with Belarus more seriously. Commenting on Ahmadinejad's visit to Belarus in 2006, Radio Liberty described it as part of the "diplomatic offensive". It claimed that in conditions of increased pressure on Iran by the U.S. and the EU, "Tehran has made large-scale and ambitious diplomatic offensive, including visits at the highest level to such countries as China, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Pakistan."¹

However, in late 2000s, when the U.S. and Israel managed to convince the wider international community of the necessity to isolate Iran, relations with that country ceased to be for Minsk only an asset. In addition, at that time the power of President Ahmadinejad weakened. And he actually was the person whom Lukashenka tried to approach in the mid 2000's. This weakening and as well as the rising tensions between different political fractions in Iranian politics became more visible after the 2009 Iranian presidential election. Most likely, it had an impact on bilateral relations. In any case, it is probable that these and some other factors can explain the significant decline in the Belarus-Iran relations since the end of 2010.

Thus, the following stages in Belarus-Iran relations can be distinguished:

- 1993-2002 – ground setting and establishing contacts;
- 2003-2010 - intensification (peaking in 2006-2009.);
- 2010-2012 - decline in the relations.

The structure of this paper is based on the analysis of the relations first in their chronological order, and then according to the thematic areas of cooperation.

1 Iran, Belarus Sign Cooperation Agreements, RFE/RL, November 7, 2006,
<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1072553.html> (consulted on 20.9.2012)

1.2. Earlier research.

This is in fact the first open analytical study of Belarus-Iran relations. The previous analyses were made almost exclusively within the framework of journalistic publications, particularly in Belarus. A rare exception was an article by Bartosz Bojarczyk². The author makes interesting points; however, he hardly supports them by references to the facts. In the rest of cases, the relations with Iran were considered only in broader analytical articles on relations between Belarus and the developing countries³.

Even Iranian reviews usually omit any analysis of relations with Belarus⁴. Western publications, even if they mention the topic, do it in no more than just one phrase. Shireen Hunter in her monograph on Iran's foreign policy during Ahmadinejad rule devoted to Belarusian-Iranian cooperation as much as a couple of phrases (sic!)⁵. Apparently, the Western analytical and academic community working on the subject of Iran, does not feel any particular risk in this regard. An example of this is the book by Ray Takeyh dedicated to Iran's external relations after 1989, where Belarus is not mentioned at all⁶.

2 Bojarczyk Bartosz. Stosunki białorusko-iranskie // Białorus w stosunkach międzynarodowych (pod redakcją Ireneusza Topolskiego. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2009.

3 For instance, the articles on the cooperation of Belarus with the developing countries in the Belarusian Yearbook [Štohadovik], written by the author of the paper and by Andrej Fiodaraŭ. In particular, see Belarusian Yearbook 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011.

4 For instance, Azghandi, Ali-Reza., Siasat-e khareji-ye jomhuri-ye eslami-ye iran. (Chap-e panjam) Tehran: Nashr-e ghoms, 1388; Deghani Firouzabadi, Seyed Jalal., Siasat khareji-ye jomhuri-ye eslami-ye iran. (Chap-e sewwam) Tehran: Sazman-e mottale'e wa tadwin-e kotob-e olum-e ensani-ye daneshgah-ha, 1389.

5 Hunter Shireen T., Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era. Resisting the New International Order, Praeger, 2010.

6 Ray Takeyh, Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs, Oxford University Press, 2009.

2. Relations before 2002

Unlike Turkey, Belarusian contacts with Iran begin at the end of the twentieth century. In the early 1980's the Soviet authorities send to the BSSR a large group of communist immigrants from revolutionary Iran⁷. These people have had and continue to have a significant role in the development of Belarus-Iran relations.

The diplomatic relations between Belarus and Iran were established in March 1993. However, their real development is associated with of Lukashenka in Belarus and president-reformer Khatami in Iran. In December 1997, the Embassy of Belarus opened in Iran. In February 2001, the Iranian Embassy opened in Minsk. The Belarusian Embassy in Tehran employs 4 diplomats.⁸ For a long time, since the embassy opened until 2008, the ambassador was a KGB general L.Račkoŭ, now his post is taken by a career diplomat V.Rybak.

Intergovernmental Belarus-Iran Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation was established back in 1995 and usually is headed by the Belarusian Minister of Industry and the Minister of Commerce of Iran, which gives it a quite a significant role on both sides. This distinguishes it from other similar bilateral commissions with the Third World countries, where the level of the members is not even (as in China's case) or lower on both sides (as in most other countries of the Third World).

During this period, trade between the countries increased significantly. In 1993, it totaled to 89 thousand U.S. dollars, in 2000 to 25.9 million, in 2001 to 38.707 million⁹. Back in the early 2000s presidents of the two countries set a benchmark of the trade volume of 100 million U.S. dollars¹⁰.

Table 1. Official contacts of Belarus and Iran in 1993-2002.

Year	Contacts
1995	visit to Iran of the Prime Minister of Belarus (March), visit to Belarus of the First Vice President of Iran Mr. Habibi (July)
1996	visit to Belarus of the Foreign Minister of Iran (August)
1997	visit to Iran of the Foreign Minister of Belarus (October) ¹¹
1998	first visit to Iran of the President of Belarus (March)
1999	not found
2000	visit to Belarus of the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran Hassan Rowhani (January), a meeting between Belarusian and Iranian presidents during the UN Millennium Summit in New York (September).
2001	visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi (February?), the Minister of Defense Shamkhani (April?), visit to Iran of the Minister of Industry of Belarus Anatol Harlap ¹² .

This gives grounds to say that Belarus-Iran relations were developing since the times of Rafsanjani's presidency, and also to say that the beginning of this relationship have been put before the confrontation the official Minsk with the West started, and even to some extent before Lukashenka was elected to his post.

7 Що засталося ад рэвалюцыі. Наша Ніва, 11 лютага 2009. <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=23718> [Što zastałosia ad revalucyi. Naša Niva, February 11 2009]

8 The official site of the embassy: <http://www.iran.belembassy.org/rus/membership/>, consulted on 30.7.2010.

9 The material of the briefing, conducted by Mr. Pavieł Łatuška, the press-secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus (took place on March 21 2012) (<http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-03-21-3.html>)

10 An interview of the head of Asia and Africa Department of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign affairs Alaksieja Skrypko to *Bielaruskaja Dzielavaja Hazieta* ["Белорусская деловая газета"] (The interview published in *BDH* ["БДГ"] 02.04.2002 №48), <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-04-02-1.html>

11 About the visit of the Iranian president, MFA, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2004-09-02-1.html>

12 Интервью начальника управления Азии и Африки МИД Беларуси Алексея Скрипко "Белорусской деловой газете" (Интервью опубликовано в "БДГ" 02.04.2002 №48), <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-04-02-1.html>

3. Relations after 2002

3.1. Methodology of the analysis.

The relations were assessed using a quantitative analysis method developed by the author. It was not used for the analysis of relations until 2002 because of the complexity to collect relevant information, since tracking official contacts *post factum* is quite a complex matter that requires resources that the researcher was lacking.

The quantitative analysis was performed basing on the number of detected contacts between the two countries representatives and their evaluation. Trustworthy official and unofficial sources are used. Since early 2011, the regular monitoring is carried out in the framework Belarus' Foreign Policy Index, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies¹³.

The applied quantitative analysis methodology was originally developed in the framework of a research project on the relations between Belarus and developing countries, implemented in 2010 at the Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere" (IPS). As a part of the same project, I created a database on the contacts with such countries and conducted initial analysis of the relations until 2010, which is a continued in this work.

The analysis is based on the calculation of "engagement indexes", reflecting the level of activity and contacts in Belarusian relations with a particular country or a region.

The index consists of the sum of quantified contacts (contact index) and the sum of quantified presence of the respective countries representative (representation index).

To calculate the contacts index a certain numeric value is assigned to each contact: from 1 to 5, depending on the level of importance, which in its turn is determined according to the importance of the persons involved for the state system of the respected country. In the case of visits the importance is determined by the highest position in the delegation.

If a meeting between Belarusian and foreign representatives takes place on the territory of a third country, the level of contact is determined with regard to the Belarusian side, but this estimate is divided by two, since such contacts are generally less durable and less linked to specific agreements.

Regarding delegations, the principle of "absorption" is provided for, when the numerical value of the highest official "absorbs" the values of all other members of the delegation.

Scale:

Level of contact	Numerical value
President	5
Prime Minister, Vice President and Head of the Presidential Administration, speakers of the Parliament	3
Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers of key ministries (foreign affairs, defense), Secretary of the Security Council, advisor to president	2,5
Other ministers, chiefs of staff, senior party officials	2
Other significant visits	1

To calculate the representation index the presence of permanent representatives is assessed on an annual basis, for each year of the service:

Embassy - 3 points; Consulate - 2 points.

3.2. Engagement index

For the period 2002-2010 we found 64 contacts: 5 in 2002, 5 in 2003, 5 in 2004, 4 in 2005, 10 in 2006, 11 in 2007, 6 in 2008, 10 in 2009, 8 in 2010.

Table 2. Belarus Engagement index in relations with Iran.

Year	Contact index	Representation index	Engagement index
2002	12	6	18
2003	9	6	15
2004	11	6	17
2005	7,75	6	13,75
2006	23	6	29
2007	23,75	6	29,75
2008	11	6	17
2009	16,25	6	22,25
2010	16	6	22
Total for the years 2002-2010	130,75	54	184,75 ¹⁴
Average contact level	2,04 (total number of contacts 64)	N/A	N/A

The last two years are not included in the table because, in my opinion, they already belong to a new period of Belarus-Iran relations, which is subject to very different characteristics than the previous period of 2002-2010. The fact is that in the last two years, contacts between the two countries registered a fraction, despite the fact that the constant monitoring of the Belarus-Iran relations. In 2011, there were three contacts (contact index is five), in 2012 - two (index - 4.5). This represents a clear decline in activity of the parties, even if we assume, that some of the contacts could be not included into monitoring.

Table 3. Military-technical cooperation component

Год	Coefficient of contacts in the military-technical field
2002	2,5
2003	0
2004	0
2005	0
2006	0
2007	5
2008	0
2009	0
2010	0
Total for 2002-2010	7,5
Share of contacts, associated with the military-technical cooperation in the total number of contacts (2002-2009)	4,55%

The share of military-technical component is very low, despite the perpetual speculation by the Belarusian opposition, U.S. and Israeli sources, that Belarus has large-scale cooperation with

¹⁴ To compare: similar figure for the same period for the Middle East countries (without Northern Africa) amounts to 314,25, with China to 216,75.

Iran in the military sphere, in particular, constant insinuations that it sells missiles to Iran. We discuss it further in the section on the military and military-technical cooperation.

It is possible to single out two surges in the military-technical and military relations linked to specific circumstances. In 2002, the contact was associated with the supply of tanks, after which both sides hoped they could pursue new projects. In 2007, Lukashenko was trying to approach the new president of Iran. He used his usual military and military-technical trump. However, he did not take much risk, because at that time, such contacts were not something unusual. For instance, at the same time Moscow was negotiating with Tehran the supply of extremely important for Iran air-defence systems S-300 (never supplied in the end).

4. The peculiarities of the relations

As Bartosz Bojarczyk notes, "From the very beginning the cooperation between the countries in the political sphere was very good, but quite limited in the economic sphere." The main determining factors were large geographical distances, relatively low economic attractiveness and weakness (sector-orientation) of the countries, isolation and international sanctions, repeatedly applied to both Iran and Belarus, strategic relations with Russia¹⁵.

Lukashenka has repeatedly stressed that Belarus and Iran have "no closed topics for cooperation"¹⁶ - a phrase that has become a convenient formula to determine the relations with many countries in the Third World. Responding to a question by *Bieloruskaja Dieľovaja Gazeta* about the possibility to export to Iran dual-purposes products, Aliaksiej Skrypka, head of the Department of Asia and Africa said, "I would like to emphasize that in Belarus there are no closed topics for cooperation with Iran. Unequivocally, we always strictly adhere to the rules, and we will comply with the international obligations in our trade with Iran¹⁷."

Interestingly, even when the reformists had the power in Iran, the Belarusian president stressed that there were no differences in political views between leaders of the two countries¹⁸. In the mid-2000s along with the change of political leadership in Iran and the rise to the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, many former Iranian government officials, who had to deal with the Belarusian side, appeared in the opposition (as M. Khatami and M. Karroubi), while others were even imprisoned after the riots of 2009 (as M. Aminzadeh). However, the Belarusian side was able to quickly shift to Ahmadinejad's administration and maximize the Belarus-Iran relations by friendly personal relations of the two presidents. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, Mottaki, stated "The presidents of the two countries are the architects of a new phase of cooperation between Iran and Belarus."¹⁹

As noted by Shireen Hunter, during Ahmadinejad's rule, as well as the rule of two previous Iranian presidents, Iran's relations with Eastern European countries were characterized by a continued stagnation. The only exception to that was Belarus. However, she did not look at the history of the Belarus-Iran relations before Ahmadinejad²⁰.

15 Bojarczyk Bartosz. Stosunki białorusko-iranskie // Białorus w stosunkach międzynarodowych (pod redakcją Ireneusza Topolskiego. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2009. - s. 255.

16 In particular, here: About the meeting of the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka with the Minister of trade of Iran Mohammad Shariatmadari (press-service of the President), MFA <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-10-04-6.html>

17 An interview by the Head of Asia and Africa department of the Belarusian MFA Alaksiej Skrypka to by *Bieloruskaja Dieľovaja Gazeta* (published on 02.04.2002, №48), MFA, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-04-02-1.html>

18 In particular, here: About the meeting of the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka with the Minister of trade of Iran Mohammad Shariatmadari (press-service of the President), MFA <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-10-04-6.html>

19 Belarus and Iran have big potential for cooperation 12.12.2008, website of the president of the Republic of Belarus, <http://www.president.gov.by/press67127.html#doc>

20 Hunter Shireen T. Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era. Resisting the New International Order. 2010. - p. 99.

4.1. Increase in trade.

Increase in trade was stable, not impetuous (as in the case of Venezuela), which gives grounds to say that in the future it will be preserved on more or less the same level. Before 2011, trade balance for Belarus has always been positive, which is important for Belarus as it is severely affected by the trade deficit. In 2011, the situation was the opposite for the first time. It may be because in that year the Belarusian side for the first time produced a certain amount of oil.

Table 4. Dynamics of trade between Belarus and Iran²¹. USD, millions.

Year	Trade	Export	Import	Trade Balance
2003	21,4	20,5	0,9	19,6
2004	36,7	33,3	3,4	29,9
2005	38,4	35,6	2,8	32,8
2006	35,6	31,7	3,9	27,8
2007	75,9	66,5	9,4	57,1
2008	93,8	83,6	10,2	73,4
2009	71,6	63,2	8,4	54,8
2010	104,8	97,2	7,6	89,6
2011 (1st six months)²²	54,28	24,49	29,79	

Belarus' major exports are potash fertilizers, synthetic fibres, trucks and tractors. We import fruits, cars and spare parts from Iran²³.

In February 2011, at a press conference on the occasion of the anniversary of the revolution, the Iranian ambassador said that his country was implementing investment projects in Belarus on approximately \$1.5 billion. He mentioned that Belarus-Iran projects for more than \$ 1 billion were negotiated. As an example, he mentioned the project on construction of "Magnet-Minsk" by "Keison" company (about 250 million euros), and the construction of logistics centre "Prylessie" in FEZ "Minsk", which is described below.

One should note that Iran's investment projects in Belarus are widely promoted as a rule at the intentions stage and the absolute majority does not even go into the planning stage, so the statements of the Iranian side should be treated with caution. A significant part of Iranian (as well as Chinese and some other, including Israeli) investment projects is related to low-tech or even "dirty" production. Examples are Iranian businessmen intentions to launch wire production in Rečyca, to build a cement factory and organize production of crushed stone in the Homiel region (thus creating competition to the state enterprise existing in the same mineral deposit). Chinese partner also put forward such "cement" projects from time to time.

Apart from trade, the main areas of cooperation are the oil production, automobile industry and construction.

21 The content of the table for the years 2003-2008 is taken from the website of the Belarusian Embassy (<http://www.iran.belembassy.org/rus/relations/trade/>). The data for 2009 is from the website of the Government of the Republic of Belarus "Iran is for wider cooperation with Belarus" // website of the Council of Ministers: http://www.government.by/ru/rus_dayevents20100129.html

22 The data for 2011 is from: Iran-Belarus midyear trade ties up 37%, Press TV, Aug 9, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/193038.html>

23 Belarus and Iran have Big Cooperation Potential, website of the president of the Republic of Belarus, 12.12.2008, <http://www.president.gov.by/press67127.html#doc>

4.2. Oil production.

The Belarusian oil project in Iran was launched in 2007, when, after a preparatory stage, it was announced during Ahmadinejad's visit to Belarus. For the sake of illustration, we will recall statements concerning the project.

Ahmadinejad declared that there was "huge potential" for cooperation, and that the Iranian side had officially given Belarus access to Jofeir oil field, which could produce up to 30,000 barrels per day (according to the Belarusian Foreign Ministry). Later both sides declared even greater intentions. They "stressed the need for mutual cooperation in various sectors of oil and gas industry, building oil refineries, exploitation of oil and gas fields, as well as construction of an underground gas storage facility in Iran," as was mentioned in the joint statement issued after the meeting of the two leaders. Lukashenka said that oil from Jofeir either will be processed in Iran or will simply be extracted by Belarusian enterprises and sold on world markets.²⁴

In return, Ahmadinejad took a moment for political purposes. He had previously called Lukashenka "one of his best friends", but during the visit in 2007, he said "we have agreed to pursue a policy of solidarity in the international arena. [...] The big powers, who are trying to impose their hegemony, will yield to the strong will of our nations."²⁵

However, from the very beginning the oil project also faced conditional factional nature of the Iranian government, hostility of the bureaucracy and a number of other actions by both sides, which hindered its implementation. In particular, the Iranian side allocated for Belarusians the deposits on the border with Iraq still mined since the 1980-88 war.

In turn, the Belarusian side was doing its best to avoid investing their own money in the project. In May 2007, *Belarusnafta* announced that it expects to attract investment from Vietnamese state oil company *Petrovietnam* to develop Jofeir oil field. It was assumed that Petrovietnam could fully finance this Belarusian project²⁶. For some reason, this idea failed, and then the Belarusian side sought of getting money from Iran itself.

In May 2009, after the meeting of First Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Siamaška with the deputy-governor of the Central Bank of Iran Reza Raei, it was announced that all the problems with Jofeir project financing are solved: the central bank of Iran would allocate the money²⁷. Foreign sources reported that Iranian agreed to "borrow" to *Belarusnafta* 212 million U.S. dollars²⁸. However, from the Iranian point of view this loan destroyed the essence of oil cooperation with Belarus. No wonder, as Iran expected the Belarusian side to bring new technologies, distribution channels and investments. The last two tasks, in fact, failed. The modernity of the technologies brought by Belarus is also a debatable question.

There is a reason to assume that these circumstances were rather negative for the project development. In contrast to a similar Venezuelan project, the Iranian one has not brought any specific benefit to the country. In mid-August 2011, *Belarusnafta* was reported to stop the project on oil production in Jofeir and work in the oil industry in this country in general. As a reason for the contract termination, the Iranian side stated that the Belarusian company failed to meet the agreements in terms of the volume of production²⁹. Some Belarusian media suggested

24 Yuras Karmanau (The Associated Press), Belarus forges deal to tap Iranian oilfield, May 22, 2007, http://seattletimes.com/html/nationworld/2003716752_beliran22.html

25 Belarus, Iran leaders happy with outcome of Minsk visit, RIA Novosti, 22/05/2007, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20070522/65909833.html>

26 Хроника // Информационно-аналитический бюллетень Института стран СНГ (Институт диаспоры и интеграции). Страны СНГ. Русские и русскоязычные в новом зарубежье, № 169, 15.05.2007, стр. 87. [Khronika//Information and analytical bulletin of the Institute of CIS (Institute of Diaspora and integration). CIS and Russian-speakers in the "new abroad", issue 169, 15.05.2007, p. 87.]

27 Belarus plans to enhance joint project on oil production in Jofeir field. 12.05.2009, National TV and Radio, <http://www.tvr.by/eng/economics.asp?id=11366>

28 Iranian central bank helps fund Belarusneft oil exploration, MEED, 21 May 2009, <http://www.meed.com/sectors/oil-and-gas/iranian-central-bank-helps-fund-belarusneft-oil-exploration/2031055.article>

29 "Беларуснафта": Беларусь выходзіць з праекту па здабычы нафты ў Іране. Радыё Свабода, 17.08.2011

that the reasons for contract termination were the sanctions imposed on *Belarusnafta* by the U.S. in March 2011 for its cooperation with Iran.

Belarusnafta, Iran's Oil Development Company and Iran's Petroleum Engineering Company signed in September 2007 the service contract to develop the Jofeir field. According to the general development plan, annual production about 1.3 million tons was expected. According to the official reports, the actual daily production did not exceed 2.8 thousand barrels, with the necessary contract 3.5 thousand³⁰. However, in February 2011 the Iranian ambassador said that the daily production of oil in Jofeir reached 15,000 barrels and will double in the near future³¹. Belarusian official media provided minimum coverage of the project termination. In particular, *Belarus Today* casually said: "The other day it was reported that *Belarusnafta* was winding down its work on the Iranian Jofeir oil field but Belarusians will definitely have something to do in Venezuela," where, they say, the situation is much better³².

4.3. Automobile industry.

In late October 2004, the Belarusian delegation had a working visit to Iran. They studied a possibility to create car assembling in the free economic zone "Minsk" together with the Iranian company *Iran Khodro*. The delegation was headed by Mr. Alaksiej Vahanau, the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Monetary Policy in the Belarusian Parliament³³.

The project deliberately was implemented very quickly. In August 2006 in the presence of Iranian Minister of Industry Tahmasebi *Samand* assembling in Minsk was officially opened³⁴. In turn, around the same time in Iran they started to assemble Belarusian trucks.

In May 2008, the Iranian side has bought 42 percent of *Unison* shares, which demonstrates once again the wish of the Belarusian side to avoid investment in Third World projects. In early 2009 there were intentions to expand the product range of Iranian cars manufactured in Belarus. Already at the beginning of cars production in 2006, it was planned to release a thousand of cars every year. However, for example in 2008 they managed to assemble only about 300 cars. Regardless the fact that before that at the meeting of the *Unison* Supervisory Board it was decided to assemble 1200 cars in 2008³⁵.

In the case of *Samand*, as in the case of many other joint projects, the participants emphasized the fact of possible access to a lot bigger Russian market. Therefore, on the adoption of the Customs Code of the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan, in 2010 Iranian officials announced that *Samand* production in Belarus became profitable again and its volume increase. They said that previously high tariffs on components and export duties on finished products

<http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/24299296.html> [Belarusnafta: Belarus quits the Iranian oil project. Radio Svaboda. Consulted on 17.08.2011
<http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/24299296.html>]

30 "Беларуснафта": Беларусь выходзіць з праекту па здабычы нафты ў Іране. Радыё Свабода, 17.08.2011
<http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/24299296.html> [Belarusnafta: Belarus quits the Iranian oil project. Radio Svaboda. Consulted on 17.08.2011
<http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/24299296.html>]

31 Jofeir oil production hits 15k barrels, Press TV, Feb 12, 2011 <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/164827.html>

32 Кольченко Игорь. Четкий механизм. Об отношениях между Беларусью и Венесуэлой. Беларусь сегодня, <http://www.sb.by/viewpoint/120234/> [Kolchenko Igor. Clear Mechanism. About Belarus-Venezuela Relations Today]

33 About the Belarusian delegation visit to Iran aiming at creating a common project on automobile industry development, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2004-11-01-2.html>.

34 About the visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister to Minsk, MFA, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2006-09-06-1.html>

35 Андрей Алехнович. Иранский автопром нацелился на белорусский рынок // Немецкая волна, 17.02.2009 [Andrej Alehnovich. Iranian Automobile Industry Aiming to Enter Belarusian Market// Nemeckaja Volna] (<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4037218,00.html>)

made production unprofitable³⁶. Indeed, *Unison* successfully certified *Samand* in Russia and in March 2012 began selling cars to Russian customers³⁷.

The Belarusian government itself seems to become very sceptical about the *Samand* project. On February 15, 2011 during the discussion of 2011-2015 plans in the House of Representatives First Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Siemaška said that the government wants to abandon the Iranian car assembly in favour of one of the Chinese models. "We are extremely dissatisfied with the activities of the company. During five years, they only sold a thousand of cars. And that is due to my personal pressure on state structures, such as the Interior Ministry. The quality of this car is not that good, and the price is high. (...) we will probably turn to China. We have already begun negotiations with two Chinese firms, and perhaps we will abandon the Iranians in favor of the Chinese." This sole passenger cars producer in the country has actually remained only an assembly line, almost all parts were imported.

The *Samand* project became a symbol of failure. Referring to the problem of increasing tariffs on imported cars, on 17 June 2011, Lukashenka promised to solve the car problem³⁸, possibly through construction of a car factory. "Not like it turned out with the Iranians or *Ford*". Indeed, the production of *Samand* is not closed, but the process of preparing for production of Chinese cars in Barysau started.

4.4. Belarusian car industry in Iran.

MAZ (Minsk Automobile Plant) and BelAZ (Belarusian Automobile Plant) have been working in Iran since the 1990s. Regular large BelAZ export to Iran started in the mid-2000s, however, there was no intention to establish a BelAZ assembly line there. As for MAZ, it created a local company, *MAZ-Iran*, and set a target to assemble trucks there. In January 2004, MAZ began to supply *MAZ-Iran* with car sets in Noushahr (Mazandaran)³⁹, and in early December 2010 in Tabriz (Eastern Azerbaijan). They started MAZ trucks assembly⁴⁰. The activity of Minsk Tractor Plant (MTZ) was less successful. In early 2004, it lost a partner (Iranian company that prepared Belarusian tractors assembly project). The Foreign Ministry began to promote the idea to transfer the case to the hands of *MAZ-Iran*, which has already proved to be somewhat effective⁴¹. However, MTZ apparently failed to create an assembly in this country, although some supplies were made.

Further development of the MAZ in Iran also seems problematic. First, the Belarusian side has always had problems with investment funds. Second, in the light of the planned acquisition of MAZ by Russian KaMAZ, MAZ together with its Iranian partner have to be aware that soon the Minsk plant will be in the hands of its Russian competitor on the Iranian market⁴².

36 Diagest. Iran. Air and car industry, 11.02.2010, http://polpred.com/?ns=1&ns_id=203288

37 Car sales to Russia, Junison, <http://unison.by/index.php/ru/2012-03-05-08-30-21>

38 Лукашэнка абяцае вырашыць аўтамабільнае пытанне, Наша Ніва, 17 чэрвеня 2011, <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=55967> [Lukashenka promises to solve the "car issue", Nasha Niva]

39 Минский автомобильный завод приступил к поставкам машинокомплектов в Иран, MAZ-Амкодор, 09.02.2004, <http://www.maz-amkodor.ru/gnews/6170> [MAZ Begins Car Set Export to Iran, Amkador]

40 Сборочное производство грузовых автомобилей «МАЗ» открылось в Иране, Iran.ru, 10.12.10 http://www.iran.ru/rus/news_iran.php?act=news_by_id&n=1&news_id=70480 [MAZ Assembly Launched in Iran]

41 On Cooperation Between Belarus and Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/b598fe0190969ebd.html consulted on 10.09.2012.

42 Владимир Дубовцев. Беларусь-Иран: связи особого значения. Агентство политической экспертизы, 3 октября 2011. <http://bdg.by/analytics/591.html> [Vladimir Dubovtsev. Belarus-Iran, Special Relations. Political expertise agency, October 3, 2011]

4.5. Construction.

One of the major Iranian projects in Belarus was the construction of a large transport and logistics complex *Prylessie* in FEZ "Minsk". It is a bit protracted, but it continues successfully. Investors say it will be finished as early as in 2013⁴³. Keison company is likely to be the main investor of *Prylessie*. Its presence in Belarus could be noted since the early 2000s. It could not take part in the reconstruction of the Independence Square, but continued its work in the country. They do not stress Iranian participation in *Prylessie* investment project, by contrast focus on cooperation with German designers in project development. The project is of one of the most successful in the history of bilateral relations. It is essentially private and implemented by the local Iranian political refugees from the 1980's, but the Iranian embassy supports it.

At the beginning of 2011, Keison signed an agreement to build a multifunction complex in Minsk, *Magnet* (\$ 250 million). In this case the investor also emphasizes of German company services in the design⁴⁴. In addition, *Keison* is engaged in housing construction in Minsk.

Numerous bureaucratic procedures on both sides strongly affect project realization. In Iran, they sometimes are impossible to overcome due to factional political structure. In particular, until the end of 2004, Iran's ambassador to Belarus was Mr. Hashemi-Golpaegani, from the party of former President Hashemi-Rafsanjani "Kargazaran-e Sozandegi". However, it is difficult to say who is responsible for a number of failed Iranian projects in Belarus, like construction company, *Keison*.

4.6. Obstacles to economic cooperation.

A new Iranian Ambassador Abdullah Hosseini expressed his dissatisfaction with the bilateral relations between the countries in quite a sharp way. According to the official communication of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, during one of the "round tables" on the development of Belarus-Iran cooperation in Iran, he said: "The government system of this country is not efficient (*ravon* in the original). There is specific bureaucracy. Another significant problem is the lack of regular navigation from the Iranian.⁴⁵" At the same time, "Hosseini said that due to the political situation in Belarus, it seems that we will not witness major changes in the country in the upcoming five years. The country's interests are so intertwined with Russia, that it is difficult for them to separate their own political the structure from the Russian one."⁴⁶

According to another source Hosseini also complained that "the English language in this country is not extended."⁴⁷ Present at the seminar commercial counselor from the Belarusian embassy Mr. Sadouski said in turn: "We have few options for the development of trade relations with Iran, and these opportunities are based not only on the economic potential, but they are associated with the political will."⁴⁸

43 Логистический центр Прилесье сдадут в эксплуатацию в 2013 г. Podves.com, 7-05-2011, <http://podves.com/novosti/2235-logisticheskij-centr-prilese-sdadut-v-ekspluataciyu-v-2013-g.html> [Logistic Centre *Prylessie* to be Put into Operation in 2013]

44 Мингорисполком подписал договор с инвестором из Ирана, Podves.com, 21-03-2011, <http://podves.com/novosti/1674-mingorispolkom-podpisal-dogovor-s-investorom-iz-irana.html> [Minsk City Executive Committee signed a contract with an Iranian investor]

45 http://www.iccim.ir/fa/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5155:1388-05-24-08-49-53&catid=1:---&Itemid=81

46 http://www.iccim.ir/fa/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5155:1388-05-24-08-49-53&catid=1:---&Itemid=81

47 Hemmayat-e vijeye sefarat-e belarus az sarmayegazari-ye tojjar-e irani, Econews, 12/05/1388, <http://www.econews.ir/fa/NewsContent.aspx?id=108495>

48 Hemmayat-e vijeye sefarat-e belarus az sarmayegazari-ye tojjar-e irani, Econews, 12/05/1388, <http://www.econews.ir/fa/NewsContent.aspx?id=108495>

Talking about the complications to Belarus-Iran cooperation one should note such factor as objective ignorance of both parties about each other's peculiarities. Belarus has a very limited amount of even roughly trained specialists in the region and the country, although it sees Iran as a priority, and separates it from the region. Iranians seem to perceive Belarus as a splinter of Russia. For instance, even Iranians who live in Belarus call local inhabitants "Russian". The Iranian Embassy defiantly rejects the Belarusian language. Although the official name of the country is "Belarus", even the official news agency IRNA sometimes uses alternative "White Russia", *rusiye sefid*.⁴⁹ Another Iranian news agency, Fars, considers Belarus a "Central Asian State."⁵⁰

Even in official statements clearly show Belarus as a part of something bigger—the Soviet Union or Russia. Deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Taleai noticed: "Belarus is a very important country in the international arena, as it was once part of the Soviet Union"⁵¹. The Parliament's Speaker Hadad Adel after his visit to Belarus has not only included it in a number of Central Asian republics, but also was speaking to the Fars news agency about a "Russian industrial centre" Minsk. He added, "we visited a giant tractor factory in the capital, Minsk, and the Russian side expressed its interest in production and selling tractors in Iran"⁵²

Negative stereotypes hinder cooperation from the Belarusian side as well. Despite the high-profile public statements, Belarusian visas for Iranians are issued on approximately the same conditions as for the citizens of any other developing country. Iran also does not give any special privileges to Belarusians in obtaining visas. The Belarusian Interior Ministry (perhaps after consultations with other agencies) in 2000s included Iran (just as war-ravaged Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and other countries) in the list of countries whose citizens were subjects to special control. In practice this meant for example, that to process each individual invitation for an Iranian it was necessary to hold an interview at the level of the heads of the Department of Citizenship and Migration of the Ministry of Interior. It is very likely that this provision still remains in effect.

4.7. Belarus-Iran relations and Russia.

There are many objective reasons to correlate Belarus with Russia. It is true that in the case of relations with Iran, there really is a good reason to consider them in connection with the Belarusian-Russian and Iranian-Russian relations. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find unequivocal evidence. The topic is not public, as the activities of the Belarusian government in general. However, Bojarczyk's opinion seems to correspond the reality: "The relationship between the states [Belarus and Iran] are formed through relations with the Russian Federation. Potential areas of cooperation, i.e. fuel and military sector, are limited by Russia, which seeks to maintain a dominant position in the Belarusian energy sector, and in the supply of arms to Iran ... Russia has many tools and opportunities to control of both states"⁵³.

However, his belief that Moscow sanctioned the activation of the Belarus-Iran cooperation in the second half of the 2000s is controversial. This activation of occurs in the second half of the 2000s, at a time when Belarus was distancing from Russia. There is rather a reverse correlation: between the deterioration of Belarus-Russia relations and the intensification of the Belarusian foreign policy activity in other areas, including Iran. Many experts repeatedly expressed an idea that Belarus was used to transfer to Iran and other countries, confronting with the West, certain products and technologies primarily of strategic importance. However, no one revealed any fact that would speak in favor of this assumption.

49 For instance here: <http://www.irna.ir/View/FullStory/?NewsId=1247533> Consulted on 10.07.2010.

50 Iranian Commerce Minister Visits Belarus, FARS, 2009-02-16, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8711280879>

51 Deputy FM: Iran-Belarus Ties Beneficial to Both Nations, FARS, 2008-12-14, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8709241372>

52 Parliament Speaker upon his arrival from the Central Asian Republics: Belarusian president to visit Iran next June, FARS, 2005-12-17, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8409260538>

53 Bojarczyk Bartosz. Stosunki białorusko-iranskie // Białorus w stosunkach międzynarodowych (pod redakcją Ireneusza Topolskiego). Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2009. - s. 260.

4.8. Banks and crediting.

In Belarus, only two small banks with Iranian capital were registered. According to Mr. Bahdankievič, "These banks are also advantageous for Belarus, as it means the influx of capital. Besides, there are some Belarusian peculiarities. We do not formally opened branches of foreign banks here, and if something opens, this structure acquires a status of independent bank. This means that the owner of the capital cannot withdraw it. He can only sell it to another owner. In short, it is an investment in our banking system. This money services the Belarusian economy".⁵⁴

In 2008, *Trade Capital Bank* (TC Bank) was founded in Belarus. 99.89% of the capital was owned by Iranian bank *Tejarat*. The share of *TC Bank* accounts for about 1% of the Belarusian bank capital, and in terms of assets, *TC Bank* in July 2012 had the 12th place out of 32 Belarusian banks. This is because the leading state-owned banks hold the majority of the capital in Belarus. They are followed by private Russian banks. Therefore, *TC Bank* creates at least some diversity. Its main purpose was most likely to service exports and imports between Belarus and Iran, which have always been limited. In January 2012, *TC Bank* also became subject to U.S. sanctions against *Tejarat*. After this, in early August the National Bank has suspended *TC Bank's* license to undertake a range of banking operations for a year.⁵⁵

In October 2009, another Iranian bank, *Onerbank*, was registered. It is smaller a (authorized capital amounted to only 11.5 million euros compared to 16 million at *TC Bank*). *Onerbank* was created by Bank Refah Kargaran, Saderat Bank and the Export Development Bank of Iran.

In early October 2011, the Chairman of the National Bank Ms Ermakova announced an intention to get loans from Iran for \$ 400 million⁵⁶, but just like the previous times, when it came to Iranian loans, the money was not received. After a week, the negotiations stopped because of U.S. sanctions against the Iranian Central Bank, according to Ermakova.⁵⁷

54 Уладзімер Глод. «Іранскі банк у Менску адключылі ад амэрыканскіх даляраў». Радыё Свабода, 24.01.2012. <http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/24461467.html> [Uladzimir Hlod. Iranian bank in Minsk turned off from American dollars. Radyjo Svaboda.]

55 Постановление Национального Банка Республики Беларусь № 402 от 3 августа 2012 года. [Decree 402 of August 3, 2012 of the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus]

56 Беларусь закладае акцыі «Нафтана» за \$1 мільярд. Наша Ніва. <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=61115> [Belarus pawns *Naftan* shares for \$ 1 billion. Nasha Niva]

57 Беларусь-Ирак-Иран: переменный успех, АЕБ.by, 07/17/2012, <http://www.aeb.by/news/belarus-irak-iran-peremennyy-uspekhi-i-sanktsii-zsha-perashkodzili-peramovam-ira-iranski-kredyt-dlya-belarusi>, 29.06.2012, <http://euroradio.fm/report/sanktsyi-zsha-perashkodzili-peramovam-ira-iranski-kredyt-dlya-belarusi-111533>

5. The balance of political and economic relations

5.1. Geopolitical and ideological aspects.

Belarusian Foreign Minister Siarhei Martynau said: "Our political relations are in good shape, and our goal is to ensure that economic ties between our two countries moved up to the same level"⁵⁸. Polish researcher Bartosz Bojarczyk believes that the Belarus-Iran relations "are developing in principle on the basis of tactical political alliance rather than on establishing wider trade." Moreover, the "isolation and international pressure reasoned by undemocratic internal systems and clear violation of human rights, is an essential integrating factor"⁵⁹.

Belarus quite clearly emphasized Iran's right to its nuclear program in the framework of relevant international agreements⁶⁰. However, it generally avoided political statements on Iran, which distinguishes relations with Iran from those with China. This hands-free approach does not exclude the Belarusian support to Iran in international organizations, such as during the vote on the IAEA resolution on February 4, 2006 that related to the Iranian nuclear program and the IAEA Director General's report to the Security Council on the situation around the Iranian nuclear program. During the voting in the IAEA Council, the resolution was supported by 27 countries, even by China and Russia (forced). Against voted only Syria and Venezuela. Belarus, Algeria, Indonesia, Libya and South Africa abstained⁶¹. The Iranian government English-speaking television declared: "Belarus was one of the countries that supported Iran's nuclear program and opposed the direction of the Iranian issue in the UN Security Council at a meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors"⁶².

Lukashenka in an interview to the Russian newspaper "Tomorrow" in December 2006 stated, "The position of Belarus is that nobody in the world should have nuclear weapons". Then he added a rhetorical question: "Iran is the richest power. Russia has nuclear weapons, as well as South Korea, China, Pakistan and India. In that case, why should not Iran have it?"⁶³. However, one should not overestimate the importance of the statements made specifically for anti-American audience of marginal Russian newspaper.

Apparently, in response to the U.S. sanctions against a number of foreign, including Belarusian companies working with Iran in early June 2011, Iranian President made a statement in which he warned of the "complex Western states conspiracies aimed to put free country on their knees"⁶⁴. In these conditions, he said, "Support of the revolutionary and independent countries in the world is one of the principal strategic policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran". He also pointed out the importance of stable political and economic relations between Iran and the "independent and anti-American (anti-arrogance) countries" and called for greater ties with Venezuela, Ecuador and Belarus.⁶⁵

58 Стенограмма встречи Министра иностранных дел Республики Беларусь Сергея Мартынова с представителями СМИ по итогам визита в Иран (Минск, 24 октября 2006 года), МИД, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2006-10-24-1.html> [The script of the meeting of Siarhei Martynau, Belarusian Foreign Minister with journalists following his visit to Iran (Minsk, October 24, 2006)]

59 Bojarczyk Bartosz. Stosunki białorusko-iranskie // Białorus w stosunkach międzynarodowych (pod redakcją Ireneusza Topolskiego. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2009. - s. 255.

60 As, for instance, here: Стенограмма встречи Министра иностранных дел Республики Беларусь Сергея Мартынова с представителями СМИ по итогам визита в Иран (Минск, 24 октября 2006 года), МИД, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2006-10-24-1.html> [The script of the meeting of Siarhei Martynau, Belarusian Foreign Minister with journalists following his visit to Iran (Minsk, October 24, 2006)]

61 More details here: Sasan Fayazmanesh. The United States and Iran: Sanctions, wars and the policy of dual containment. Routledge, 2008. - p. 184.

62 Iran, Belarus expand defense ties, Press TV, Jul 5, 2007 <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/15489.html>

63 Фёфелов А. Вопрос в лоб Александру Лукашенко // Завтра, № 40 (672), 4 октября 2006 г. [Fefelov, "A straight question to Lukashenka"//Zavtra, №40, October 4, 2004]

64 Iran warns of West plots against nations Jun 9, 2011, Press TV, <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/183864.html>

65 Iran warns of West plots against nations Jun 9, 2011, Press TV, <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/183864.html>

Among the more pragmatic Iranian government officials Belarus seems to be regarded as one of the "Iran's windows to the world", which should be kept open in case of sanctions strengthening. It also is one of the few Iran's supporting pillars in the modern world (next to Cuba, Venezuela, and Syria).⁶⁶

However, the Belarusian leadership avoids high ideological and political support for Iran. For instance, Lukashenka avoided participating in international ant-terrorist summit in Tehran on June 25-26, 2011⁶⁷ and in the Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in August 2012.

5.2. Belarus-Iran relations and Israel.

Belarus maintains fairly good relations with Israel. during his visit to Belarus the Deputy Prime Minister - Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel A. Liberman was raising the issue of the Belarus-Iran relations. In particular, he said, "Iran is a threat to world's stability. Militants operating in our country are prepared in Iran. This is our vision, and I believe that we will all understand it". He even forced the Iranian ambassador to react⁶⁸.

According to the Foreign Ministry press service, "the head of the Belarusian Foreign Service has informed his Israeli counterpart that our country is developing fruitful relations with Iran. (...) He stressed that the Belarus-Iran cooperation is peaceful in nature and is not directed against third countries."⁶⁹

66 Гутарка з тагачасным паслом Ірана ў Беларусі Абдулом Хасэйні ў лістападзе 2008 г. у Менску.

67 Iran invites Belarus to terror summit May 28, 2011, Press TV, <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/182171.html>

68 Белорусско-иранские отношения не являются угрозой для других стран, уверяет иранский посол, Naviny.by, <http://naviny.by/pda/material/?type=news&id=312417>

69 Ответ пресс-секретаря МИД Беларуси А.Попова на вопрос представителей СМИ в связи с обсуждением белорусско-иранских отношений в ходе встречи Министра иностранных дел Беларуси С.Мартынова и Заместителя Премьер-министра – Министра иностранных дел Израиля А.Либермана, МИД, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/ae70216cdc730f97.html>

6. Military-technical cooperation

6.1. Political speculations.

There is no evidence of large-scale military and military-technical cooperation between Belarus and Iran, not even indirect. However, the assumptions of such evidence's existence are periodically articulated, in particular Kenneth Katzman says: "Most of Iran's other military-to-military relationships, such as with Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, North Korea, and a few others, generally center on Iranian arms purchases or upgrades, although such activity is now banned by U.N. Resolution 1929 of June 2010."⁷⁰ But in fact, not all such activities are prohibited; in particular, the prohibition does not apply to a wide range of conventional defensive weapons.

But the myth of the supposedly secret and illegal cooperation with Iran has become quite popular with the opposition forces in Belarus. It also helps to increase in the West, especially in the United States, the importance of countering Lukashenka's regime. However, there is no evidence of such cooperation, and the facts of open cooperation suggest its limited nature.

An example of a typical speculation is Wikipedia's entry: "reportedly, Belarus exported to Iran tanks, armored vehicles and heavy artillery"⁷¹ without reference to any sources that would confirm it. Ukrainian "MigNews" stated, "It is known that Belarusian experts helped Iran in creating ballistic missiles" Shahab-3 "and" Shahab-4 ", failing to provide evidence to support such a claim.⁷²

Such statements may reflect the fact that they were made not on the basis of the facts, but rely on geopolitical calculations that have little to do with Belarus or real Belarus-Iran cooperation, especially the confrontation between Israel and Iran, Iran and the United States. Not surprisingly, the focused on sensations "MigNews" belongs to the chairman of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress Vadim Rabinovich and is known for its scandal-oriented publications, where the facts are relegated to the background, if at all present.

6.2. Belarusian arms trade.

At the same time, the official Minsk not only provides information about its arms sales to the United Nations, but has also published at least two "National Report of the Republic of Belarus on export control policy, the export of arms and military equipment"⁷³ while the Foreign Ministry declared that Belarus was the first CIS country which had begun to publish such reports.

In any case, the only reliable evidence of arms trade was the sale by Belarus of three consignments of tanks in 2000 (eight T-72M1), 2001 (fourteen T-72M1) and 2002 (fifteen T-72M1).⁷⁴ There are reasons to believe that the Belarusian side would willingly continue this trade, but, by some accounts, it was stopped by Russia.

⁷⁰ Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses Kenneth Katzman Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs September 5, 2012 CRS Report for Congress Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress <http://www.fas.org/sqp/crs/mideast/RL32048.pdf> – p. 25.

⁷¹ Belarus–Iran relations, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belarus%E2%80%93Iran_relations Accessed on 30.09.2012.

⁷² Иран и Сирия получают российские ракеты через Беларусь. MIGnews.com, 03.12.2007, http://www.mignews.com/news/politic/world/021207_221904_74771.html

⁷³ Олег Лицкевич, Основными получателями белорусского вооружения в 2002 году стали Иран, Судан и Алжир. Белта, 20.11.2003. Крыніца: http://www.iran.ru/rus/news_iran.php?act=news_by_id&news_id=14703 (published on 21.11.03).

⁷⁴ Паводле UN Register of Conventional Arms http://unhq-appspub-01.un.org/UNODA/UN_REGISTER.nsf Accessed on 5.8.2011.

In spring 2001, the Iranian Defense Minister Shamkhani visited Belarus. In January 2007, the Belarusian defense minister Malcaŭ paid a two-day visit to Iran, during which a Memorandum of Understanding in the field of defense was signed.⁷⁵

In the spring of that year, there was information about the possible delivery of Russian defense systems "Iskander" to Iran and Syria via Belarus. The death of Ivan Safronov, journalist of the Russian "Kommersant" newspaper, was by associated some circles with the fact that he allegedly found confirmation of the development of a scheme for such supplies.⁷⁶ However, this kind of speculation had appeared in the media before. In particular, after Lukashenka's visit to Iran in 1998, a scandal-oriented "Washington Times" wrote, "It also raises new fears among American officials that Belarus will become a conduit for Russian missile and nuclear weapons technology to Iran. The Clinton administration has been trying with little success to stem the flow of Russian missile technology to Iran for the past year".⁷⁷

In July 2007, Belarus is visited by the Iranian Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar.⁷⁸ In May 2009, a news agency, close to the Iranian government, reported, citing Russian media, that Belarus sold Iran tactical missile system "Iskander-M".⁷⁹ This information has never been confirmed by official sources.

In addition to armored vehicles, another cooperation item between the defense ministries of Belarus and Iran concerned tactical and organizational know-how of the Belarusian army. In 2010, the agency FARS reported on launching a joint military PhD course in command and control, run by the University of Malek-e Ashtar of the Iranian Ministry of Defense and an unnamed "Belarusian educational body."⁸⁰ Iran's Deputy Minister of Science, Research and Technology Mohammad Mehdienejad announced it while meeting with reporters following a meeting between officials of Iranian and the Belarusian Ministries of Science. Other areas of cooperation may also include some elements, suitable for use in military applications - "computing, supercomputers, physics, thermodynamics, and nanotechnology."

6.3. Possible secret cooperation.

Some of the contacts and projects that at first glance seem civil, but they can also contain components allowing their military use. Thus, during a visit to Belarus of Minister of Information and Communication Technology Muhammad Suleiman in October 2010, Iran and Belarus declared their intention to cooperate on space communications program⁸¹. In particular, the parties agreed to negotiate the establishment of the direct telecommunications link between the two countries, on Iran's participation in the creation of the Belarusian national system of space communications, manufacturing telecommunications equipment. However, next to clear civil contacts, the Iranian delegation visited the State Military-Industrial Committee and the Research Centre *Sviazinformservis*.

Of course, it is impossible to exclude completely the possibility of some secret supplies, especially from the groups that the government does not control. Take as an example the Ukrainian case when after the regime change in 2005, they found out the fact of illegal sale of

⁷⁵ Belarus, Iran sign memorandum of understanding on defense, RIA Novosti, 24/01/2007, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20070124/59644294.html>

⁷⁶ Напрыклад, тут: Иран и Сирия получают российские ракеты через Беларусь. MIGnews.com, 03.12.2007, http://www.mignews.com/news/politic/world/021207_221904_74771.html

⁷⁷ Gertz, Bill, Belarus, Iran Plan Weapons-Trade Pact, The Washington Times, February 17, 1998.

⁷⁸ Iran, Belarus expand defense ties, Press TV, Jul 5, 2007 <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/15489.html>

⁷⁹ Belarus 'selling Iran Iskander-M missiles', Tehran Times. May 10, 2009, http://old.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=193641

⁸⁰ Iran, Belarus to Hold Joint Command-and-Control PhD Courses, FARS News Agency. News number: 8903031716. 2010-05-24. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8903031716>

⁸¹ Iran, Belarus to Cooperate in Space Communication Programs, FARS News Agency. News number: 8708020635. 2008-10-23. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8708020635>

samples missiles to Iran and China⁸². However, at the moment there are no signs of such uncontrolled groups' activity in Belarus.

This, of course, does not prevent radical Belarusian opposition from creating fantastic pictures of cooperation between Minsk and Tehran. One recent example was the claim, that with the help of Belarusian experts, technologies or equipment (perhaps provided by Russians) the Iranian army managed to lend an American drone aircraft in the Iranian province of Khorasan. No evidence can prove this statement. It is based only on the general knowledge about the good relations between Belarus and Iran, and a high level of radio-electronic protection in Belarus⁸³.

6.4. Sanctions.

On September 29, 2004, the U.S. imposed sanctions against the Belarusian company *Belvneshpromservis* for alleged supply of equipment and technology that could be used to build cruise and ballistic missiles⁸⁴.

The *Jerusalem Post* in 2008 and 2009 accused Belarus in selling to Iran S-300, but each time it appeared to be a canard. In July 2010, *The Associated Press* declared the same statement⁸⁵. It should be stressed that Belarus did not supply S-300, although in principle it would not be a violation, since this weapon system was not at that time included in the UN list of weapons that are prohibited for delivery in this country⁸⁶. True latter fact was not mentioned by any of the media, and some experts even said that the delivery of the S-300 would be a violation of UN sanctions⁸⁷.

U.S. in May 2011 imposed sanctions against Belarusian companies *Beltechexport*" and *BelOMA* for their alleged cooperation in defense sphere with Iran, North Korea and Syria.

82 See: Cruise missile row rocks Ukraine. BBC, 18 March 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4361505.stm>

83 See, for example, here: Белорусские технологии на службе исламистского режима. Белорусский партизан. 14.12.2011, <http://www.belaruspartisan.org/bp-forfe/?page=100&backPage=19&news=114389&newsPage=0> [Belarusian technologies serve the Islamism regime. Bieloruskij partizan.]

84 "Белвнешпромсервис" отрицает обвинения Госдепартамента США // Белпан, 01.10.2004. <http://news.tut.by/economics/44703.html> [*Belvneshpromservis* denies the accusations of the U.S. State Department//Belapan]

85 Иранцы б'юцца, а ў беларусаў чубы трашчаць, Наша Ніва, 9 жніўня 2010, <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=41951> [Iranians are fighting, Belarusians are suffering, Naša Niva]

86 In fact, UN still does not prohibit it at the time when the article is being written.

87 Fyodorov Andrei. Belarus – Third World: Nothing But Hope So Far. // Belarusian Yearbook – 2008. A Survey and Analysis of Developments in the Republic of Belarus. Minsk: Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies, Belarus Public Policy Fund, 2009. - p. 99.

7. Iran as a platform for cooperation with other countries

In Latin America, Belarus has achieved some success using one of the countries in the region (especially Venezuela) to establish contacts with other countries or to launch projects involving third countries. In Iran, this is not so easy, given the international tensions over the country. However, some attempts were made.

7.1. Afghanistan and Pakistan.

During Foreign Minister M. Khvastou's visit to Tehran in March 2002, he discussed the Afghan situation, in particular the "possible participation of the Republic of Belarus in the economic reconstruction projects in Afghanistan"⁸⁸. Probably, there were hopes to finance Belarusian projects in Afghanistan with Iranian money.

This issue was raised again during the visit of the Belarusian Security Council Secretary H. Niavyhlas to Iran in June 2002. He discussed with the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran Hassan Rowhani "issues of humanitarian cooperation in light of conflict settlement in Afghanistan and the possible participation of Belarus in the economic reconstruction of this country"⁸⁹.

The results of the negotiations are unknown, but the Belarusian side not only abstained from making any projects in Afghanistan, but even refused to accredit its ambassador in Tehran as an Ambassador to Kabul as well.

Officially, the Belarusian government distanced itself from the support of the U.S. operation in Afghanistan⁹⁰. However, there is information about the transportation of anti-terrorist coalition members (primarily Germans) to Afghanistan with Belarusian airlines (such as "Homelavia"). WikiLeaks published dispatches of U.S. embassy in Minsk mentioning that Minsk confiscated a container for U.S. forces in Afghanistan due to improper execution of documents.

In late 2008, a NATO official said the alliance is in talks with a number of former Soviet republics, particularly with Belarus, to ensure transportation of goods for the troops of the anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan by land routes, bypassing Pakistan⁹¹.

In addition to Afghanistan, an important additional focus are the relations with Pakistan, where in from February 2011 Belarusian ambassador is accredited.

88 21Матэрыялы брыфінга прэс-сакратара МЗС Беларусі Паўла Латушкі, праведзенага для прадстаўнікоў СМІ 21 сакавіка б.г., МІД, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-03-21-3.html> [Materials of the MFA press-secretary Pavel Latushka briefing, conducted on May 21, 2012]

89 О предстоящем визите в Иран Государственного секретаря Совета Безопасности Республики Беларусь Г.Невыгласа, МІД, <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-06-14-1.html> [About the upcoming visit to Iran of State Security Council Secretary H. Niavyhlas, MFA]

90 Лекция "Исторический выбор Республики Беларусь" в БГУ, 14.03.2003, Сайт Президента Республики Беларусь, <http://www.president.gov.by/press29279.html#doc> [Lecture "The historic choice of the Republic of Belarus" in the Belarusian State University, 14.03.2003, website of the president of the Republic of Belarus]

91 "Надеемся, НАТО не придется отвечать на этот шаг России". Интервью Заместителя помощника генерального секретаря НАТО по вопросам сотрудничества и партнерства в области безопасности, спецпредставитель генсека альянса по Кавказу и Средней Азии Роберт Симмонс // Время Новостей. 09.12.2008 <http://www.vremya.ru/2008/228/5/218762.html> ["We hope that NATO will not have to reply to this Russian step". An interview of deputy Assistant Secretary General of NATO for security and cooperation partnership, NATO Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia Robert Simmons// Vremia Novostej.]

Conclusions

Belarusian bilateral relations with Iran are not only the result of the friendly relations between the two leaders, though of course, it was advantageous as well. They began at a time when Hashemi Rafsanjani was the president of Iran and Belarus was ruled by the Prime-Minister Kebič and the Chairman of the Supreme Council Stanislau Šuškievič. Later President Lukashenka supported these relations; they continued during two presidential terms of Khatami and intensified during the presidency of Ahmadinejad. The number of persons enumerated suggests that these relations were ambiguous; it puts under question the thesis of exceptional conjuncture character of these relations.

Recession that emerged after 2010 does not mean the relations ended completely. A certain regulatory framework was established (though especially with Iran there always were problems with the ratification of the agreements and their execution⁹²). Valuable contacts that allow continuing mutually beneficial relations without official ceremonies emerged, similar to the long lasting and very fruitful relationship with Turkey.

U.S. sanctions severely hinder the development of the relationships. It is them, not the international UN sanctions that actually can be used to prevent any more or less significant project of cooperation with Iran. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the Iranian government would pay much attention to Belarus, if it had other opportunities for international cooperation.

Noisy opportunistic statements and uncritical ideological bias from both the Belarusian authorities and the opposition hindered the very idea of cooperation with developing countries, in particular Iran.

There are objective preconditions for such cooperation. First, the countries are relatively close geographically. The distance between Belarus and Iran is approximately the same as between Belarus and the UK. Second, Belarus has a lot to offer in the technological sphere as well as in trade.

In turn, Iran might not only become a source of investment. It also can help to end Russian oil and gas monopoly in Eastern Europe. It would be possible during 8 to 10 years if the U.S. lifted its sanctions on cooperation with Iran. One should remember that the Iranian gas pipe network reached Azerbaijan back in Shah times. *Odessa-Brody* oil pipeline from the very beginning was meant to transport particularly the Middle East oil. Of course, they counted on the oil from Northern Iran, but it is not a big difference in geographic terms.

However, these potential possibilities require that the Belarusian elites are aware of the national interest, that they create an expert knowledge base and a relevant infrastructure for implementing such foreign policy. Regarding sanctions, it means a need to create project strategies that would not provoke the U.S.A. and Israel. For instance, at least to avoid loud and aggressive rhetoric, that Belarusian officials usually have us describing Belarusian-Iranian projects. The international UN sanctions do not cause problems. These are American sanctions that can in fact be used to stop any cooperation with Iran.

⁹²In particular, in 2008 the ambassador of Belarus persistently and publicly called upon Iran to implement an agreement of 2004.